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Editorial Notes

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Editorial Notes

Last spring, shortly after the end of the semester, a group of veterinary students had an opportunity to participate in something wonderful. That is the time of year when the Iowa Special Olympics take place, and in recent years the Iowa State University veterinary students have made a petting zoo available to the participants. I was fortunate enough to be among the number of those students.

When I say that something wonderful happened, I do not mean it in the sense that our providing of the petting zoo was wonderful. Rather, the wonder involved came as a gift from those special people to us and I sincerely hope that we will not be soon forgetting its substance. Any pleasure the visitors of our petting zoo received was magnified and returned to our own group on a much deeper level. That afternoon awoke in me something that had been slumbering as of late, and, I suspect, it sleeps in other veterinary students as well. After all those months of books and Bunsen burners I had forgotten the things that really matter.

Of what was I reminded? Quite simply, the reasons that I am here. The reasons that I sit in lectures, review notes and read texts that are, at times, more bromides than edifiers. I was reminded of that “thing” deep within me, and that I believe exists at some level in all of us, which made me want to be a veterinarian; that certain feeling about animals which turned me in this direction of all directions. In short, I caught a glimpse of who I was and perhaps a rather oblique answer to that age old question, “what’s it all about?”.

It takes no great amount of experience to know what happens when you work the equation of animals and people. They put us in awe of the beauty and mystery of their lives. They make us smile; they make us, in a way, children again because we can touch a layer of emotion and passion too often inhibited by the later baggage of life. Animals put us in touch with a basic, primal need to express and receive love however frightening that may seem to admit, however resolutely we may try to deny it. Yet

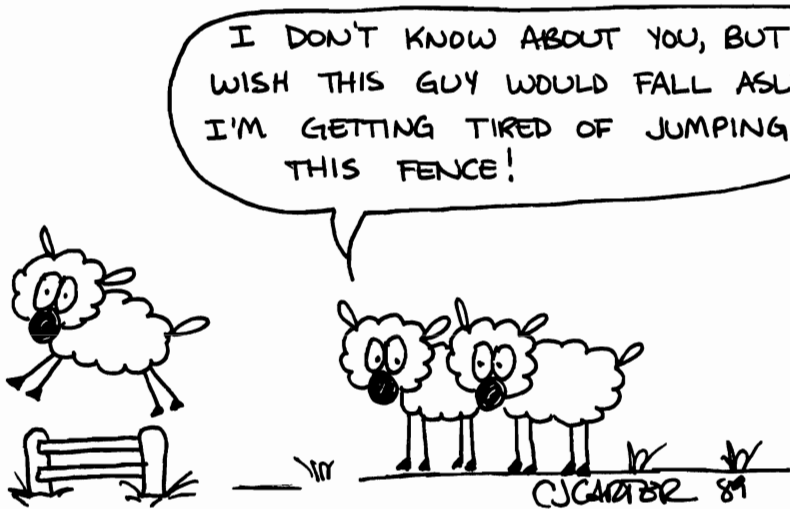
the equation works both ways because while animals make us confront ourselves, they also help us confront others. That was the secret of those May afternoons at the petting zoo. What I saw happen in that spontaneous triangle of students, animals and Olympians was pure magic and you had to have the heart of a stone not to feel it in the air. We gave to one another through the miracle of what happens between animals and people; for when we reach that bond, which can be anything from petting a dog to watching a flock of ducks settle onto a lake, we reach something unadulterated and interior, a kind of common ground that communicates our need to respond to the life around us.

Currently at ISU, there is a senior rotation involving nursing home visitation with animals, but this is not enough exposure for veterinary students. We need to start sooner and in a variety of different methods that exercise our ability to use the human animal interaction. It seems to me that part of becoming a good veterinarian is becoming a better human being and I believe experience with the human animal relationship works us toward that quality. We need to learn how to take our special feelings for animals and translate that into a dialogue with people. This can involve a variety of situations where that interface known as the human animal bond takes place. It is a neglected area of veterinary education. I would like to see programs instituted in the first year of the professional curriculum and carried through the senior year where students have a chance to interact with people in many areas. This type of exposure may manifest itself as slide presentations in grade schools, programs for service clubs, or pet facilitated therapy for the handicapped and elderly, to name but a few. If Iowa State University is producing high quality graduates then train them early to fully realize the many uses of their talents. We can do some very beneficial things later with a little preparation now.

The business of healing people and healing animals is not too divergent at its most impor-

tant level, that of compassion. Acquiring the knowledge to practice medicine is more or less a matter of endurance, and can be accomplished, albeit better by some than others, if one perseveres. It is necessary to learn that bank of information and learn it well, but not at the expense of compassion. I fear mine was wear-

ing a little thin last spring. Those special Olympians, by the free expression of their giving, taught me the simple lesson of healing through the transforming vehicle of animals. That's good medicine and I won't forget it for awhile.



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